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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ADDIS ABABA 000261

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SUBJECT: MELES OFFERS PLANS "A" AND "B" ON SOMALIA

Classified By: Ambassador Donald Yamamoto for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) In the first U.S.-Ethiopia bilateral meeting on Somalia since Ethiopia's January 26 withdrawal from Somalia, Prime Minister Meles laid out Ethiopia's views on a best case scenario "Plan A" and containment strategy "Plan B" regarding Somalia in a January 30 meeting with Acting Assistant Secretary for African Affairs Phil Carter. Meles argued that al Shabaab's clan base has largely diminished leaving only the hard-liners in place. If Somalia's Transitional Federal Government (TFG) has funds, and moves constructively toward establishing security and governing, the international community can play a constructive role toward promoting progress and stability in Somalia. If the TFG remains feckless, however, al Shabaab will likely control much of southern Somalia, Ethiopia will employ a containment strategy along the border, and the U.S. and international community must devise a sea-based evacuation strategy for the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) to avoid them being "chewed up." End Summary.

AL SHABAAB HAS LOST ITS CLAN BASE, WHICH OFFERS AND OPENING

2. (C) Prime Minister suggested that the best case scenario for Somalia now is to go back to the pre-2006 circumstances in which al Shabaab has a presence, but not control of Somalia and the TFG remains the prevailing framework for the country. Meles argued that the likelihood of such a scenario is difficult to judge, but he was clear in his analysis that as Shabaab has lost much of its previous clan base. Whereas the Habr Gedir/Ayr sub-clan had previously been al Shabaab's base, Meles posited that the Ayr have since become disillusioned with al Shabaab because their support for the group has brought the clan little if any tangible benefit leading many clan leaders to reject the groups extremist approach. Similarly, while al Shabaab had previously found great support among Somalia's Wahhabists, recent affronts to sheikhs and desecration of Muslim graves by the group has eroded its Wahhabi support, leaving al Shabaab with a "shaky social base." Meles pointed to uprisings by Somalis against al Shabaab, the receptivity of such groups to materiel and information support from Ethiopia, and the split within the Alliance for the Re-liberation of Somalia (ARS) leading some to negotiate with the TFG as manifestations of al Shabaab's loss of support. Whereas all "Islamists" tried to join the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) bandwagon in 2006, most have now decided to go their own way, Meles argued.

3. (C) In addition to losing its clan support, al Shabaab has also begun to find lagging support even among its own

fighters in recent weeks as payments to soldiers have begun to fade. Meles was unsure whether the waning payments resulted from a reduction of the flow of payments from their sources or from problems with the financial sector used to effect the payments, but was clear that the result was diminished commitment among fighters. As a result, this dynamic makes it easier to counter al Shabaab as it is cheaper to pay off their fighters to join the other side. As a result, if the TFG has access to funds to pay its security force, and demonstrates the political will both to use those funds appropriately and move forward on governance, the fragile government could attract many Shabaab fighters, leaving only the hard-liners behind and returning Somalia to a pre-2006 styled environment.

"PLAN B" IS CONTAINMENT AND DAMAGE CONTROL

14. (C) If this best case scenario fails, Meles argued, "Plan B" must be to find a way to prevent AMISOM from being "chewed up" and to contain al Shabaab. For Ethiopia, the Prime Minister asserted, dealing with al Shabaab means establishing a containment force along the Ethiopia-Somalia border. Such a force would link up closely with Somali clans along the border within Somalia (including southern Somalia, Somaliland, and Puntland) to provide a modicum of security for Ethiopia to resist al Shabaab's affronts. Meles was clear; "saving AMISOM is now beyond Ethiopia's means." Still, Meles argued that AMISOM's extraction must be sea-based as a withdrawal by air would leave the group too vulnerable to the MANPADS which have saturated the country.

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MAKING "PLAN A" WORK

15. (C) Prime Minister Meles was emphatic that the international community must not discuss "Plan B" with the Somalis as they would certainly interpret it to reflect a loss of confidence and commitment to keeping Somalia stable, resulting in a self-fulfilling prophecy. Carter briefed Meles on the United States' exploration of the viability of a joint security force composed of the old TFG and ARS elements which now comprise the government of national unity to counter al Shabaab and constrain them. Meles agreed that an approach would be vital, assuming that the new Somali leadership dynamics did not exacerbate Hawiye-Darood tensions.

16. (C) Meles argued that making "Plan A" work requires 1) bolstering AMISOM, and 2) establishing a viable indigenous security force that would be paid predictably and transparently. Meles focused on modalities for paying security forces, noting that Ethiopia had been paying TFG forces on behalf of the TFG in the latter months of Ethiopia's presence in Somalia. Meles insisted that payment modalities must be transparent and timely, and that payments must be made "as closely to the grassroots" as possible. Meles suggested embedding within AMISOM an international (possibly Scandinavian) paymaster who is trusted by both the donors and security forces. Meles argued against a UN paymaster as the UN agencies within Somalia have become "acclimatized to the ways of doing business in Mogadishu." Only once security is established, Meles argued, can the Somali government focus on building institutions.

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